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Reviving the Seventies

Fall 2007 MFA Thesis

Aimee Huber



The Nerd

Fall 2006

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The comedic farce, *The Nerd*, written by Larry Shue was directed by Theatre VCU alumni Drew Fracher on the VCU main stage in the fall of 2006. I was assigned to be the scenic designer of this show. From the initial conception of ideas, to development through collaboration, to completion of construction, the design was a challenging multi-step process. This paper will record the transformation of this comedic text into a three-dimensional world where the story can dwell.

My design process has developed differently than most scenic designers due to my background. My Bachelor of Architecture degree as my foundation has set the tone for how my method has evolved. A scenic design is based on a play's story while a building design is based on location and function. For me, the design process of both media includes an overriding concept that culminates in a three dimensional interpretation. Keeping a central concept for design helped me make the transition from architectural to scenic design. The process is the same but I did encounter challenges adjusting to unfamiliar terminology and spatial differences. In theatres, a designer is creating a space within a space in order to convey a story. The spatial experience for the audience is from the outside, not the inside as with a person walking through a

building. The actors onstage inhabit the space to portray the action of the story viewed by the audience. Another difference deals with the interaction of the designer with her design. It is a much more creative process for me as a designer working more closely with the building materials. The architectural field is somewhat removed from the actual materials as one sits in an office designing and detailing a construct. Even onsite construction administration of buildings does not involve handling any materials. An architect's role does not extend onto the construction site other than to administer the drawings. Any interaction with the site materials or colors occurs with submittals which are paperwork submitted by the builder, reviewed by the architect, and then signed off on or rejected. This separation from the actual site is the barrier that I wanted to dissolve by studying theatrical set design for my Masters of Fine Arts degree.

Architecture is not the art form that scenic design is. Once working in an architectural firm, it becomes more of a blue collar profession than a design field. To me, set design is a hybrid of design and art. Working through the design process and then drafting and modeling the ideas to be reproduced by a scenic shop develop an understanding of the building blocks of every aspect of a set. The set designer has control over every detail of every construction and must communicate it through the designer's drawings. A designer can be called upon to be in the shop during construction of the set, deal with the technical director to clarify or alter drawings, or even translate paint renderings to a scenic artist by picking up a brush themselves. All of these creative steps do not even take into account the collaborative process with the director and other designers involved in the production. The gathering of creative minds of the director, scenic, lighting, and costume designers add dimension to the design process when all have the goal of producing a great show. The director heads up the group with his or her

interpretation of the play and the designers work together to bring the director's vision to life.

This show assignment for me as scenic designer was quite fitting based on the attributes of the script. The main character of the play is an architect and the action of the show takes place in his home and its surroundings. Due to my background, I had an insight into this type of personality and what type of space he would inhabit. Architects' personalities can be very controlled and precise due to his or her training and further expectations of the profession. Five years of school is required with three years of on the job internship training before an architect can even sit for the licensing exam. The exam consists of nine parts that are each taken separately and last four hours each. When designing buildings, the aesthetics take a back seat to functionality, budgets, and safety. The culmination of these details results in a structured occupation that requires a specific personality type. Having trained with several architects, I have experienced many variations of this personality type. Although architects fit within this archetype, each is unique.

My background, working with a guest director, and my future career culminated with this play. Adjusting my thinking process to a different medium and relaxing into a completely different work environment really became obvious to me with this show assignment. At the beginning of my last year of graduate school, most of the new information has been absorbed. This show is the application of my new skills. My thesis as a documentation of this process will communicate the importance of networking, dealing efficiently with the design and build process, and how I apply this knowledge to my future.

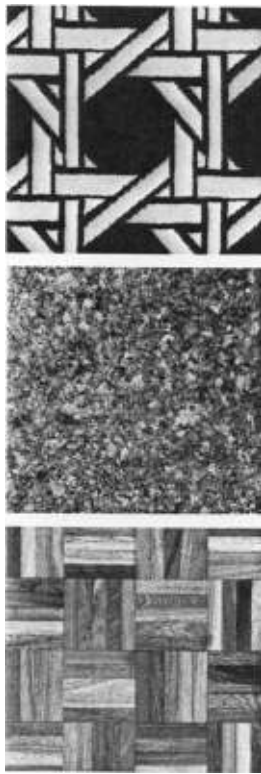
As I had previously designed mostly dramatic work, *The Nerd* as a comedy was a good opportunity for me to design. Playwright Larry Shue's intention for the play may have been different than the director, but Drew personally felt that his work spoke to him in a specific way. The differences are exemplified in specific instances described in detail later in the paper. Although he approaches instances of the play action alternatively than the writer, the director is a great fan of the small body of work he accomplished before his premature death. Any adjustments to the direction of the play are at the director's discretion so it is not unusual for changes to occur.

This play is set in the mid seventies, 1976-77 in early November in the Midwestern town of Terre Haute, Indiana, in America's heartland. Willum is the main character whose residence is the exclusive setting of the play. He is an architect in his late twenties/early thirties at the level of establishing a career and coming into his own as a designer. The physical comedy juxtaposed with a small amount of deception blows up into a huge misunderstanding providing comedic relief for the viewer. This scheme is paralleled by the director to the overall feel of the 1980's TV series *Three's Company*.

Willum is the landlord of the space that is the setting of the play. Axel, one of his housemates wants to bring Willum together romantically with Tansy, the third housemate. To do this, Axel hires his friend Kemp to impersonate Rick, a war hero who saved Willum's life, in order to implement his plan. Mr. Waldgrave, Willum's boss, his wife, Clelia, and son, Thor provide more complicated elements to the story. The result in scenic terms is several areas for the characters to move in and out of creating a situation of confusion within one apartment.

Design process

The director's tight visiting schedule in the spring of 2006 required the beginning of the process to occur rather quickly. Drew was in Richmond for a week to begin design discussions, teach a week long workshop, and familiarize again with the Hodges stage. After an initial discussion with all of the designers of his thoughts about the play, the director reconvened a meeting the following day to further confer about the essence of the characters through any research we accumulated overnight. The VCU library was an awesome resource for this as their design section accumulates books published in all different eras. Books published in the late seventies showing exactly the style at that time are prevalent in their collection. Drew responded to the overall feel of the warm yet modern 1970's architectural spaces in the specific images I chose. He identified with the warm wood floors, bright shag carpet, spaceship like practicals, and angled roofs and ceilings exemplified below.



In his description of the overall atmosphere he was looking for, he mentioned *Autofocus*, a movie about Bob Crane, the star of *Hogan's Heroes*. This obscure movie follows Crane's life from the 1960's to his death in 1978. It covers the era of the setting of the play as well as the one leading up to it giving a great overall view of the time

period. Drew referred to the design of the movie set as an aesthetic he identified with. This was a helpful tool to understand his vision as I could watch the movie to absorb it visually. In the initial design meetings, the director established specific details of a realistic setting for the time period and character. The main living room of the set needed to capture a bar, dining room, and workroom all in one. He felt these young social characters of the house enjoyed Willum's "groovy pad" often. These details provide me information to further research and develop a feel for a scenic space to pitch to the director.

In order to begin interpreting the story into a communicative space that the director approves of, I ascertained key words from the play itself. Willum's dwelling is the 2nd floor apartment of a house located in the middle of a wooded swampy area in rural Terre Haute. The time of year is autumn so the indigenous oaks and maples are supporting characters as the exterior backdrop of the apartment. The visibility of tree branches in the background helped to establish the height of the apartment. This detail is important to establish for the later game of "Shoes & Socks" where the bag of everyone's shoes falls to the swampy area below.

I developed Willum's home environment through his personality traits I discussed with the director. As an unfulfilled designer working to please an unworthy client, Willum has lost confidence in his abilities leaving him insecure in his personal endeavors as well. His repressed creativity is part of his developing character. The set is designed to reflect the inner creativity that he is not always able to express in his work. He is the owner of the house which gave me the opportunity to create an architectural space that he would hand pick or even build himself, not just a generic rented apartment. Drew wanted to develop Willum's character as a smart, young professional with a somewhat

artistic bend. He would not be the cleanest cut, white collar worker because of his inclination toward creativity balanced with functionality. Willum's careful reservation seems to have developed through a restrained workaholic quality opposing a cautiously creative one. The director wanted to capture that personality here in order to set up the "opposites attract" scenario between Willum and Tansy. Tansy is the typical weathergirl who is sassy, pretty, bubbly and a longtime friend and love interest of Willum. This set up the charming attraction between the housemates. The director's intent was to take realistic characters in a silly situation allow the play to become larger than life. A fast paced tempo and perfect timing were important elements to emphasize this. Site gags could accentuate the over the top situations created by the playwright.

The arrangement of the play's action greatly influenced the set up of the scenic requirements. Comic timing, misunderstanding, and a bit of trickery form a plot where a phony character manipulates the lives of two of the main characters achieving the goal of a third character to help the couple reveal their true feelings for one another. This specific scheme led to a restrained ground plan to further exploit the situation. Each scene is skillfully designed to manipulate the situation at hand. As a farcical comedy, *The Nerd* requires a specific layout of entrances and exits to support its progression. Other design elements add to the necessary action of the play. Through stage directions, conversations with the director, and a general read of the play, I generated a comprehensive list that follows. Not all of these items were implemented as described as the design process and build commenced. For example, Theatre VCU has a sliding glass door in its stock storage that I really wanted to integrate into the design. It fit in well with the style of the decade according to my research and was a time and money saving element as well. The combination of the availability of the door and needing a

distinct apartment entrance led me to use the large sliding door as a significant transition element. This image exemplifies the use of patio doors during the decade of the seventies. The views through the doors as well as the upper windows show exactly the environment I wanted to achieve for the wooded swamp area right outside of Willum's home.



1. Main entry into apartment
2. Answering machine with remote control and microphone
3. Large window and doorway with a view off a wooden balcony for arriving vehicles
4. hand fashioned bookshelves
5. fireplace for Axel to throw his deviled egg
6. Sofa
7. Large easy chair upstage for the monster to hide behind
8. coffee table
9. phone and answering machine on a table at center stage

10. wooden stairs leading up to balcony
11. light switch by entry door in order to have Tansy and Axel surprise Willum for his birthday
12. a bar with stools for drink mixing and general club like area
13. door to kitchen from main living room area
14. door to bedroom from main living area
15. closet door from main living area
16. window with sill on which bag full of shoes fits and a shade to cover them for game "shoes & socks"
17. rug
18. stereo that plays a record
19. drawing board instead of drafting table
20. dining table on upper level

As in any typical dwelling, the space requires a kitchen, bedroom, living room, and closet. For the action of the play, the kitchen and bedroom needed only doorways for the actors to pass through, not actual acting spaces. This left area open for the many other functions required for the action of the play. For example, the closet needed to be accessible near the end of the play when Willum, in a panic, hides the Waldgrave's son in the closet.

Researching for this realistic comedy became important in capturing the essence of the decade. It has many specific identifying styles that need to be filtered and gathered to summarize the space for Willum's existence. The decade of the seventies brought modern and rustic together. It became a combination of the contemporary structure of the fifties and the rebellious hippie culture of the sixties. This culminated into modern forms made of or accented by natural materials. Wood paneling and rich, wood plank

floors surround elliptical, spaceship fireplaces and shiny, silver eyeball lamps. These are the years of shag carpet.



The *Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer* architectural firm's work from the 1970's was a major inspiration for my specific design research. The angular movement of their architectural style captures the modernist tones of 70's architecture. In my research process for accumulating spaces, architecture, and detail, I stumbled across this firm's work and embraced the intent and character of their intimations. As an architect himself, Willum would have chosen to live in an abode which had some spatial interest to it; I felt this firm's work spoke to that. Having a specific research direction gave support for the conceptual vision I presented to the director. The floor plan needed to remain functional to accommodate the action of the play, but capture modernity also. By using angles larger than 90 degrees for the wall relationships, an edgy layout for a house plan was created. Angling the tops of the walls toward the center of the "room" added a hip effect

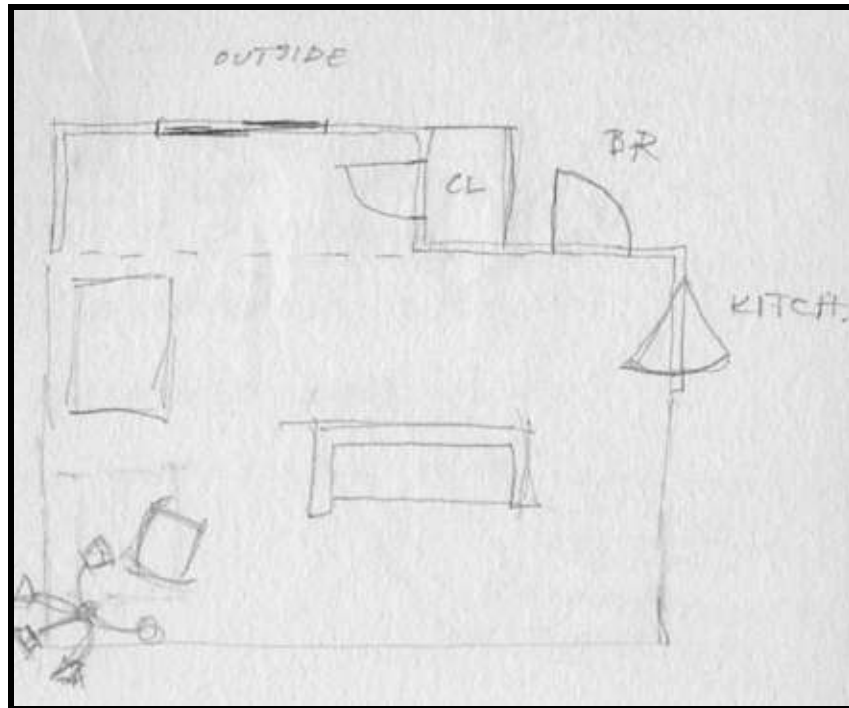
of modernity. The angular ceiling feature was inspired directly from a residence designed by Hardy Holzman Pfeiffer.



Although the furnishings of this residence speak to another era, the architecture of this space is modern and intentional. The ceiling beams running at angles instead of parallel or perpendicular to the walls lead the eye upward. The windows on the far wall, as if at the hull of a ship, create a focal interest while allowing light to filter into the space. There is timelessness to this space and a sense of well thought out design. Willum would be enamored by these gestures as a creator of space. Large wooden beams were a huge trend in architecture during this decade. The combination of rugged, dark, wooden beams with graphic lines of furniture and patterns join the character of this cutting edge disco era with the natural elements more typical to Midwestern decor. The main character being a designer would want to follow these fashionable trends.

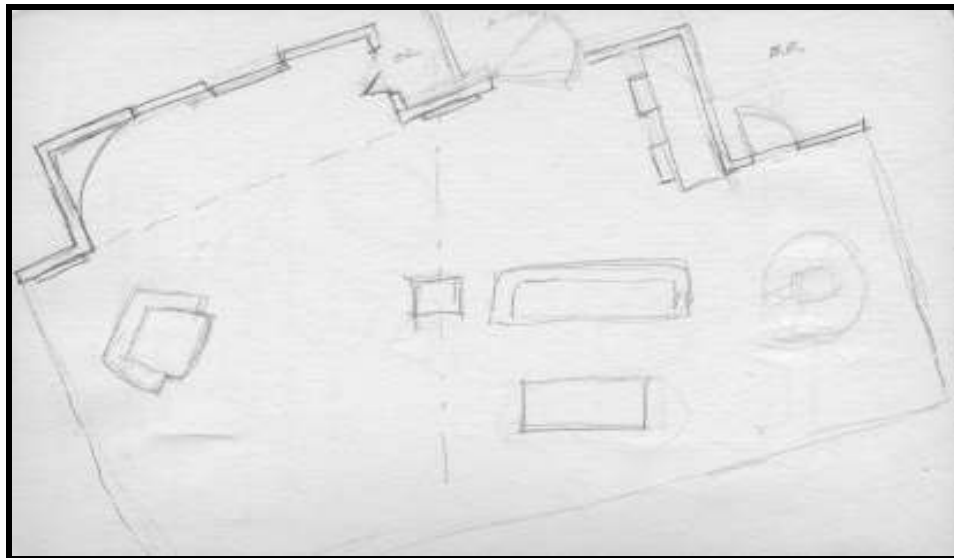
To integrate the ideas from the director and my research, I started working with basic diagrams to organize the space functionally while considering the architecture in two dimensions. The constraints of the necessary elements keep the layout options limited.

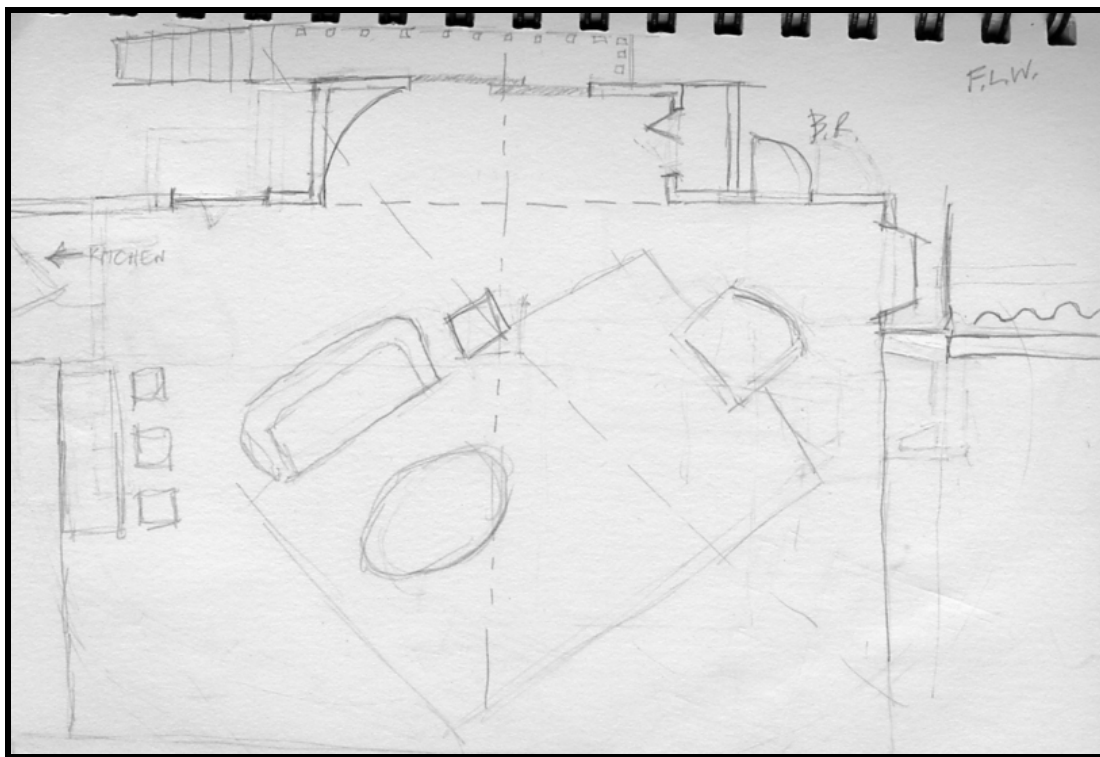
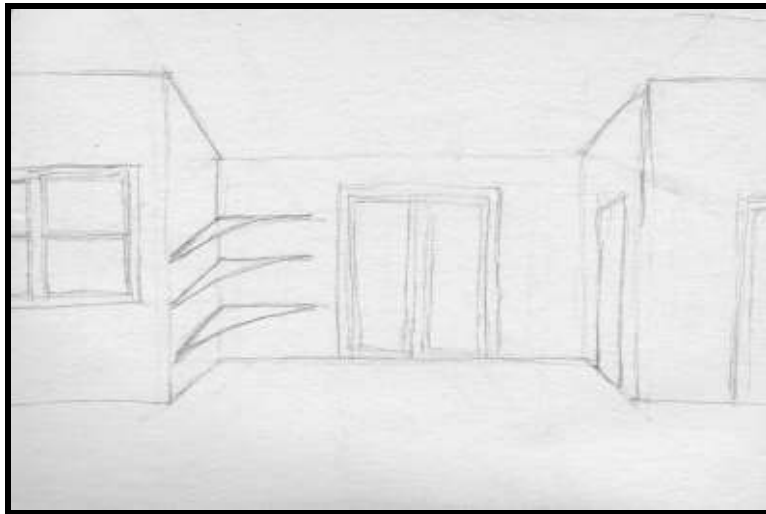
The sliding doors were initially placed slightly stage right with the closet, bedroom, and kitchen doors organizing the apartment toward stage left. The rectangle stage right denotes a drafting table which I initially was going to substitute a drawing board for. In reconsidering the space, I felt the drafting table established Willum's profession and developed his office area, another area for stage business to occur. The spider-like lamp downstage right brings in the aesthetic of the 1970's through a modern style lamp typical at that time. The square near it, indicating a chair, encircles the living room space with the sofa at center stage.



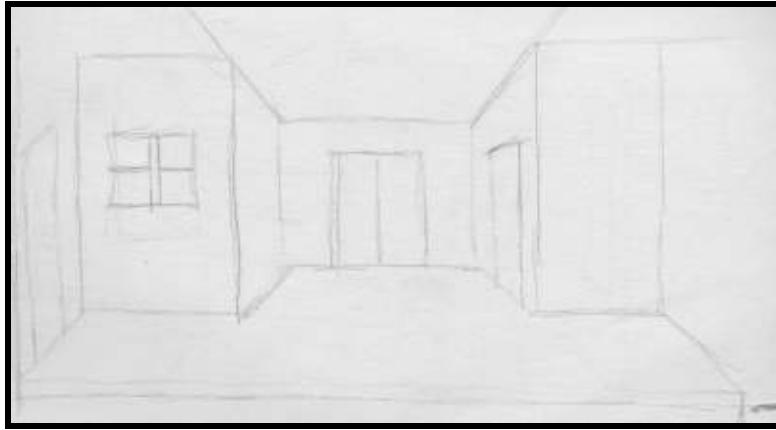
The next enhancement of the ground plan integrates layers of detail. It develops functionality while adding more elements particular to the time period and apartment personality. As blocking is introduced into the mix, the space expands. In order to accommodate the movement of the actors in different scenes, the spacing between furniture and walls becomes functional as they move to give movement allowance. Areas of the apartment become more defined giving the actors more realistic interaction

with the set. I also varied the orientation of the plan to consider the organization of the space within the theatre. Although the sightlines become obscured by this rotation, it is a helpful exercise to see the issues it resolves and creates. The audience gets a better view into the closet with this layout. The sofa running parallel to the audience limits the variation of its use. The actors end up only facing forward with the sofa in a straight forward orientation. This led me to rotate the furniture in order to allow for diverse blocking options as well as balanced views for an audience in a thrust space. The fireplace and a bar are also fully integrated into the design for more social areas.





This sketch begins moving in the direction of the resulting ground plan if the furniture were mirrored. The kitchen door and bar area are relocated to the stage left side of the apartment. The bedroom door is replaced by the closet in order to make it a focal point of the action that it involves, revealing everything to the audience.

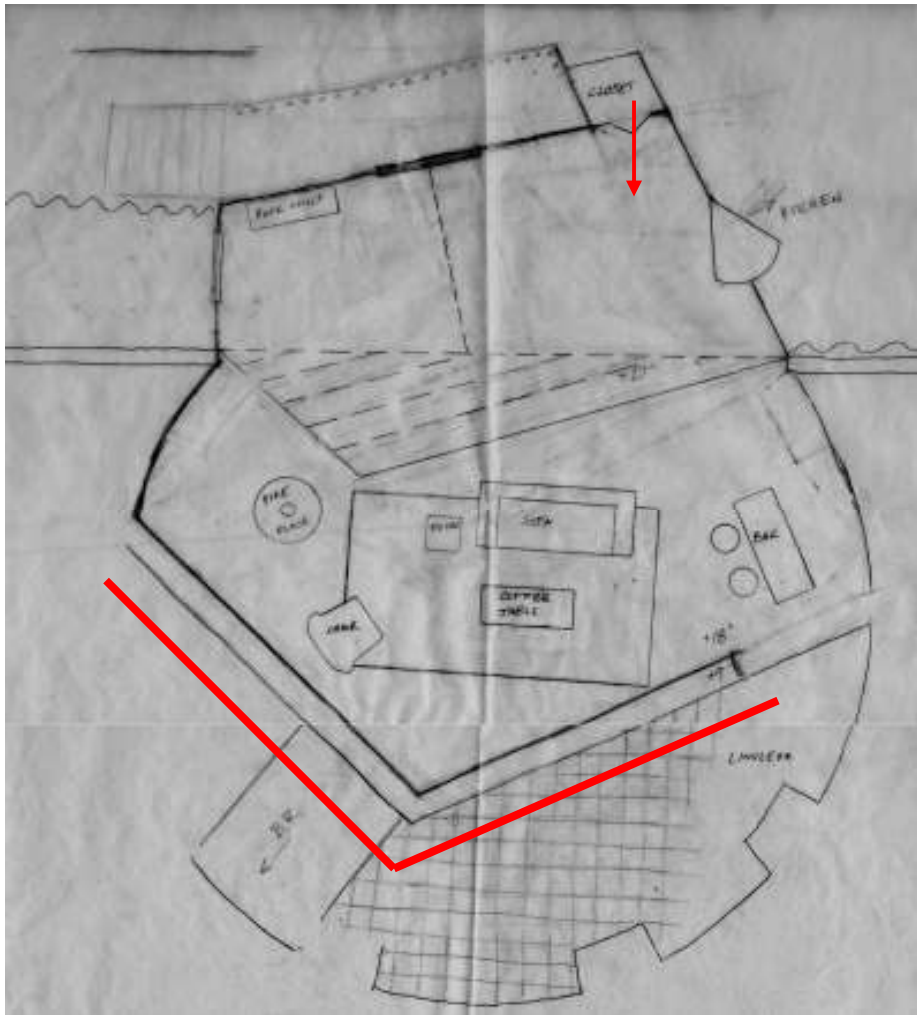


A foyer area pushes the apartment entry door upstage generating sightline issues.

The topic of sightlines presents the matter of the theatre space itself. Where does the plan sit, how is it oriented, what are they going to see? All of these questions determine the sightlines of the audience to varying parts of the set. At this point, I need to locate the ground plan in the space to resolve some of these questions.

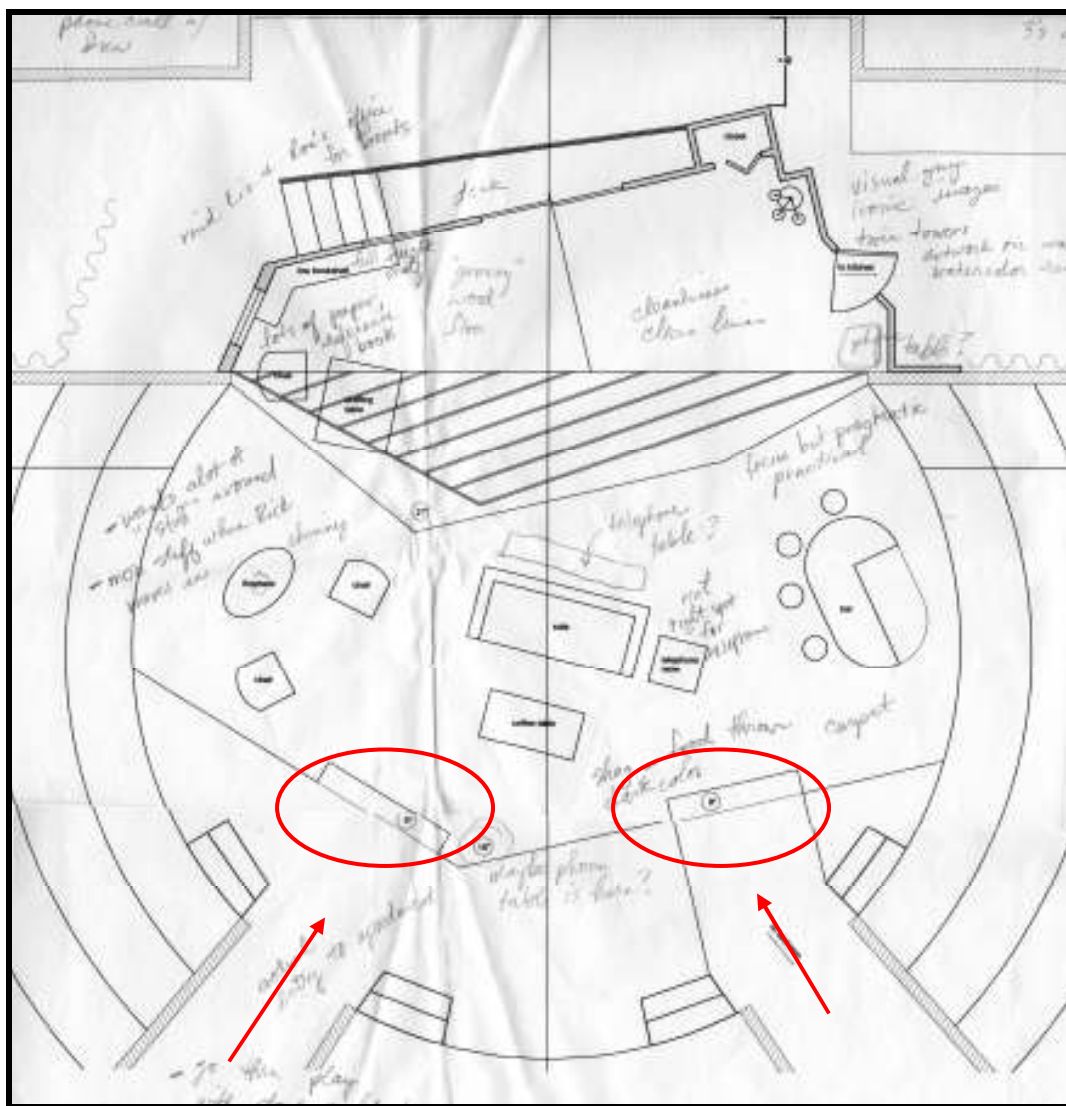
In the next development of the ground plan, the lines of the space got more distinct.

The sculpting of the down stage platforms into a “V” shape insinuates the architecture of the “fourth wall”. The living room becomes more defined with the inclusion of the rug as a unifying element. This defines the living room as a separate area from the bar, the fireplace hearth, and Willum’s office. The closet door faces down stage giving the audience a better view of the action that occurs in the closet space.



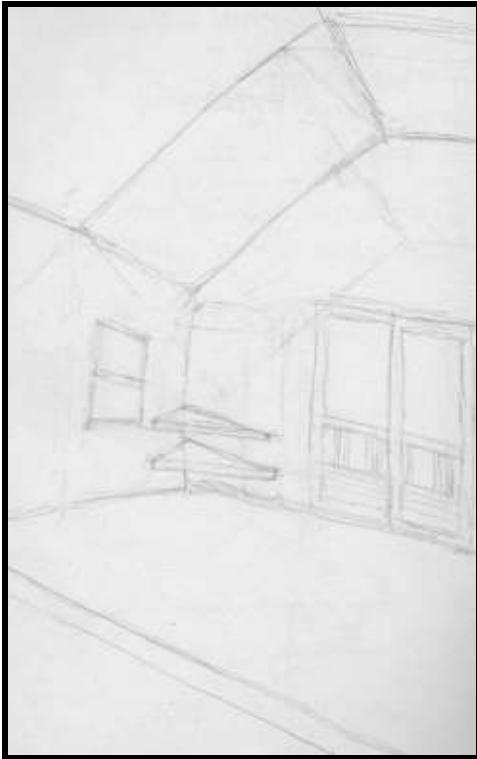
Hodges Theatre as a thrust stage limits the wall space when trying to accomplish an intimate setting by locating it physically closer to the audience. To incorporate the many doorways required by this farce, wall space is needed. The movement in and out of these openings leads to ridiculous confusion exaggerating the plot. They set up scenarios important to the misunderstandings driving the plot. I therefore decided to integrate both vomms as entrances into the living room space as a compromise to bring the audience closer to the set while providing enough access to the space. In my experience dealing with this thrust stage, using the vomitoriums as entrances create another dimension to the world the actors are immersed in and are inviting the audience to join. Ultimately, I used the stage right vom as the main apartment entrance and the

stage left vom as the hallway to the bedroom. The step down from the 18" platform height to the floor also broke up the knee wall plane that the platforms created. I used flooring and accessories to differentiate the entrances. Transferring from hand sketching to computer drafting began to solidify dimensions illustrating if they actually work or not. It is obvious when comparing the hand sketch to the computer drafting that the "V" shape has become shallower to allow the fireplace hearth and bar areas to become more spacious.



To start a three-dimensional dialogue with the ground plan, I began sketching spaces influenced by the residence designed by Hardy, Holzman, Pfeiffer as well as other

typical seventies abodes I found through research. It was key to capture interesting architecture that would be important to Willum. After meeting the functional requirements, incorporating dynamic architecture would make a simple plan more exciting.





Modeling fully introduces the third dimension to the design. Envisioning the ground plan in 3-D does not necessarily present all the glitches that may ensue. Working out the angular ceiling and overhang needed to be done in model form. Sketches integrating the ground plan and spatial tools from research developed the resulting model. I work best in three-dimensional form so modeling is my preferred medium to flush out ideas. After adding the ceiling architecture and the space began to take shape, the plainness of the walls stood out.



Adding undulation and movement to the flatness would add interest that does not exist in the initial model. An opportunity was created to insert a niche in the wall to accommodate the phone table while adding dimension to the flats. The stage directions for the play indicate that the telephone table is located at center stage. The director did not plan to center as much action around the telephone answering machine as the writer did so I was able to move it upstage to inhabit a niche carved out just for this purpose.



The early design meetings in the spring were with the director in person. From May to August interaction with the director was limited to internet and telephone communication. Overall, distance communication of the design process created gaps in the director's complete comprehension of the space. Only a certain amount of information can be communicated in a photograph, whereas a three dimensional model can be interactive. In hindsight, sending the director an actual model versus a photograph of one would have been helpful for him to grasp the spatial relationships of the furniture and architecture earlier in the design process. When a designer is absorbed in the spatial sense, it is difficult to step back and communicate it to others, especially those not trained to think in terms of three dimensions. After the director arrived at the beginning of the spring semester, he was able to fully absorb the design through the designer elevations and physical interaction with the model. Though the ground plan was completely established and rehearsal had begun, revisions could be made where he felt necessary. The changes were limited to small details such as

furniture location adjustments and door type substitutions. The modifications obviously related to blocking the director was planning in the space. For example, the location of the sofa as a downstage acting area was an important piece to consider for site lines. The upstage area was elevated 9" but the sofa itself needed a low back in order to help with sightlines. In later blocking, the low back of the sofa allowed the actors to use it as a sitting area. One feature I would have liked to keep was the bifold closet doors. Popular in the residential constructions of the seventies, this door type was chosen for the closet used as a hiding place for Thor. The director felt French doors would allow for easier access, requesting they be substituted. The result was a hollow core luaun faced single panel door. Budgetary and time constraints were also deciding factors in the change to the design.

Execution of the Design

As the platforms went into place, and the parquet flooring was laid, other details of the set were being developed. Although these processes may not have run as smoothly as possible, they were achieved in a timely manner that left me to focus on finishes, coordination with designers, and furnishings.

In order to establish the architecture of the space, I decided to incorporate a ceiling with recessed cans for practical lighting as shown in the research image below. The angled ceiling, sliding door, and recessed lighting harkens to a nostalgic 1970's era.



The ceiling became the subject of much debate as it created challenges for the lighting designer and the technical director. For the lighting, it eliminated down and back light

and caused the front light to be problematic in the upstage area that the ceiling covered. The lighting designer opted to address this challenge by mounting supplemental lights behind the archway soffit. The flood light fixture at 150 watts could not match the color temperature of the theatrical lighting fixtures which range from 500 to 1000 watts, so it was not the optimal solution. Although I had designed the layout for 12 recessed can practical fixtures in the ceiling, this was not going to be enough either. Removing the ceiling would resolve these issues and open up more options for illuminating the actors.

Constructing the ceiling was difficult for the technical director to plan out. He constructed the flats out of 2x4 lumber in order to support it. Typically, flats are constructed with 1x lumber so this was a significant increase in structure. The ceiling structure angled down toward center stage from the stage left and right flats. It also changed shape as the flats angled out and undulated to create the space. Any plan drawing of the ceiling would not be its true size and shape. The trapezoidal plan view of the ceiling is not the actual shape of the two ceiling planes. To understand the shape of each piece the technical director had to take into account the movements in the flats as well as the ceiling's pitch. Based on its atypical geometry, the ceiling's true size and shape would need to be calculated. This would be done by projecting the edges of each inclined plane to create an orthographic drawing. I don't think the technical director was looking forward to working out this calculation. If any small error was made, it could completely misalign the ceiling making this a very pivotal step in the process.

Subsequently, the ceiling was cut a few weeks into the build, prior to torturing Todd, the technical director, with the true size and shape calculation. Due to time constraints and material costs, I agreed to cut it in order to guarantee other aspects of the set got

completed. I sacrificed the ceiling, which was creating issues that may have affected the entire show. It also freed up my attention to focus on the remaining design features. By the time the decision was made, light fixtures had been purchased but were easily returned within a few days.

The overhang portion of the ceiling remained. This framework protruded from the front plane of the archway soffit, aligning with the top of it. It was dimensioned to be constructed of lumber and the technical director decided to fabricate it out of foam in order to lighten the weight of the overhang. Sheets of polystyrene were glued together to create the correct thickness. The extreme length of some pieces required more than the 8'-0" length of a typical sheet of polystyrene. In this situation, joints were staggered in order to give the structure enough rigidity to hold itself up. After assembling all of these joists for the overhang, it could not hold its own weight. In order for the structure to be stabilized, aircraft cable was used at certain points to hoist the overhang into place.

As the flats were loaded in to create the walls, some mistakes arose. One of the flats was faced on the wrong side. It was drawn to be constructed to accept the angle it was coming at the upstage flat at the stage right corner. The drawings were not followed accurately and it was faced on its backside with the angle on the downstage edge instead of the upstage edge where it would meet the back wall flat. Load in of the walls was delayed as the flat facing had to be corrected before moving forward. The error was easily fixed.

The addition of an opening in the back of the closet was made after the flats were in place and even painted. As the designer, I had not realized the amount of time that the

actor playing Waldgrave's son, Thor, would have to spend in the closet. This hidden door allowed him to exit when Willum hides him in there and reenter later in the play when he is revealed. Although it was not planned, it was easy to hide the door with set dressing such as hanging clothes and miscellaneous storage.

Another oversight did not have major impact on the build, though it could have been a disaster. The windows were important in establishing the architecture of the space, the height of the apartment, and for the "shoes & socks" game joke. I was not present at the time that the glass in one of the three windows was broken. As they were found objects, it was important that no more were broken as only two were needed. They were salvaged from an existing house so they were the perfect style for this apartment but irreplaceable. If these windows were not used, wooden frames would have to be built which there really was not time to do.



If the windows were not correctly located and installed, one of the impossible situations adding to the silly plot could not be accomplished. In the game of “shoes & socks,” All of the characters’ socks are placed in a brown paper bag and the bag is hidden by Rick on the window sill while the remaining cast stands around with paper bags on their heads. Of course, it ultimately ends up falling down to the wet swampy ground below and everyone feels foolish watching the events unfold through holes in paper bags. Muddied shoes and socks were switched out in order to insinuate they had actually fallen into the water below. The windows as well as props such as this were the details that completed the story.

There were several props that were important to the action of the play. One of the major setups was the phone and answering machine. I had researched at the end of the spring 2006 semester and so was able to begin looking during the summer for these two items as I thought they would be quite difficult to track down. I found a wonderful telephone that I, as an architect, liked the design of so I felt strongly that it would be great for Willum’s groovy pad. The Sculptura phone’s continuous curve is very identifiable as the design style of the 1970’s.

SCULPTURA® Telephone

As stunning as a fine piece of sculpture, the SCULPTURA® telephone is an artistic accent for any contemporary room. Available in chocolate brown, white, or lemon yellow. Choose TOUCH-TONE® or rotary dialing.



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TOUCH-TONE® Dialing

Description	Color	Comcode
CS2902A1-058	White	102959814
CS2902A1-093	Yellow	102959822
CS2902A1-104	Brown	102959830
CS2902AG1-058	White	103318978
CS2902AG1-093	Yellow	103318986
CS2902AG1-104	Brown	103318990

Rotary Dialing

Description	Color	Comcode
CS902A1-058	White	102960738
CS902A1-093	Yellow	102960747
CS902A1-104	Brown	102960750

Dimensions: 8.00" Wide x 7.50" High x 4.00" Deep

Manufacturing Location: Indianapolis

*Registered Trademark of AT&T Co.

†Registered Service Mark of AT&T Co.

This accessory is typical of an object an architect may be drawn to. It is a functional item that is also interestingly designed. The answering machine was a completely functional prop. It needed to have the aesthetic of the electronics of the time period but also be easily modified to accommodate lighting, sound, and special effects. This is a challenge with vintage items as they were not originally manufactured to withstand this type of application. The item I found that fit the parameters was the 1973 Phonemate.



I had to bid on both the phone and the answering machine in an online auction on eBay in order to win them. The answering machine held up well considering its age and the modifications it went through. Part of the role of the answering machine was to malfunction and become a scary character. As Thor is playing around with the remote control for the answering machine like it's a weapon, it starts to replay messages at slow speed giving voice to the monster costume head that is sitting on top of it. The lighting designer was quite enamored by this scene and requested the answering machine house an LED light as well as a hole for fog to flow from. This required adjustments to the look of the answering machine so in a collaborative effort, I agreed to

remove some of the paint on the Plexiglas cover of the machine. To accommodate the fog hose was an easier task. I gutted the machine, reassembled it and mounted the hose so the fog could flow out of the speaker perforations.



Another eBay purchase and effective set prop was a pendant light fixture in the aesthetic of the Russian constructivists. It was quite a unique purchase but I needed three of them because, originally, I had three pendant lights suspended from the overhang.

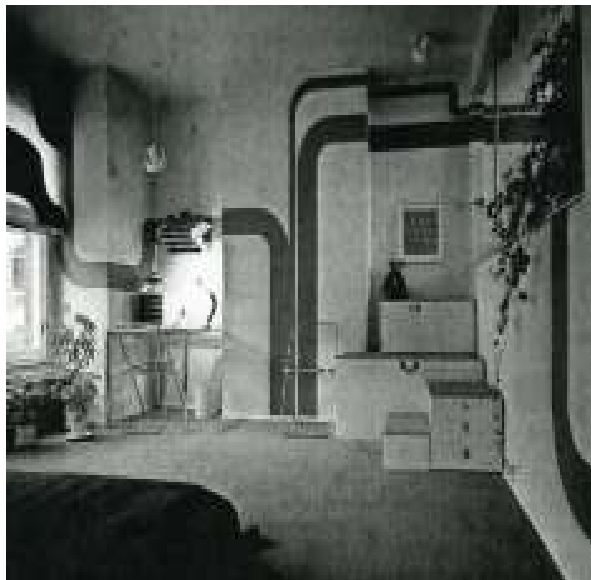


By purchasing a fixture with such a unique look, I created limited options for the remaining fixtures. I was willing to rethink the design because I really thought this fixture was perfect for the set. Initially I planned to find two matching fixtures to flank the original fixture purchased to highlight its distinct design. Oddly enough, when the lighting designer saw the fixture, he mentioned that he almost bought the fixture from a local store. Since I had purchased it online, I knew it was not the same fixture. I immediately sought out the store where he had seen it and purchased a matching fixture as if I found a needle in a haystack. This led me to alter the locations of the pendants in order to accommodate two matching fixtures instead of three. I felt these specific fixtures begged for the rest of the interior décor to meet their high design standard.

Stylistically during this decade graphic wall treatments were popular. Simple wall graphics appeared in a lot of my research prompting me to somehow integrate this into Wilum's apartment. I found so many wonderful designs while researching this time period that I felt compelled to integrate something of that nature in the set design. Although Willum was not the most progressive personality, he is influenced by contemporary design so he would take the time to create a design to paint on his walls. I felt he would have appreciated the trend.



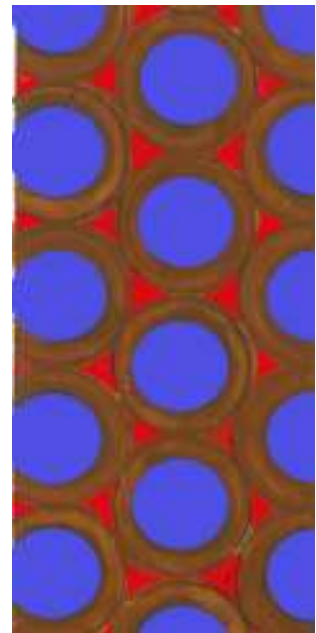
This particular image from my research has the line of brown continuing across the wall from the diamond pattern to the curtains. I like the way this space, as well as the two below, seem to encircle the inhabitant.



The continuity of the line is broken up here with repetitive pattern in the images below. It is more fractured by the shapes that create the movement but achieves the same surrounding feel.



Originally I wanted to have a continuous line or motif of some sort moving across the flats but after working on color renderings, I opted for an accent wall. I chose to display concentric circles in complementary and highlight colors on the feature wall.



The graphic pattern ends up becoming more than one pattern as the negative space between the circles in the design becomes one as well. It is similar to the Pop Art

movement from the 1960's such as work like Robert Indiana's *Love* sculpture. This graphic art form became mainstream in the designs of the 1970's.

Colors in the seventies were quite specific to that time period as well so I sought out and identified a specific palette for this apartment. This color chart begins a conversation between pigments I identified from research in vintage interior design books published in the seventies.



I wanted to keep the colors masculine for Willum yet bright since the play is a comedy. Odd tones of green were prevalent in the seventies but green can cause actors' skin to appear jaundiced. The centers of the circles were varied in color in some options. I worked with full set elevation renderings to experiment with the accent wall feature and color combinations. The overall darkness versus the brightness becomes completely obvious to me with these renderings. Although the avocado green is the perfect color to

capture this time period, its darkness brings weight to the set that I was not looking to create for a comedy.



The yellow option helped me see the cheerfulness that I am looking for with the color palette to help tell the story. Creating the most effective color scheme was challenging. Willum's meticulous personality and the brightness of the comedy needed to be captured while working with the palette of the costume designer. I was encouraged by

my paint class instructor to create full scale mock ups. This was another method for me to attempt to clarify the design pattern and color.



The final color scheme was the result of numerous renderings using various color combinations. I also went back to all of the research I had accumulated for color suggestions. It was appropriate that architects inspired the chosen palette. The firm that advanced the spatial design was a great resource for color as well.



After several variations, I chose a yellow wall with blue and silver detailing. This captured the mustard yellow indicative of this time period and combined it with a masculine blue that portrayed Willum's personality. The yellow color really expresses a popular, bright tone while enhancing the comedic story. The bathroom wallpaper in my parent's house growing up was installed in the seventies. The odd pattern stuck with me through the years and influenced my design. It was highlighted with a metallic color which inspired the silver tone in the center of the circle. The silver added that small bit

of outrageousness that parallels the hidden impracticality in Willum's personality. With all of the colors going on in the space, this was a great challenge for me to overcome. Below is the rendering I finally decided upon. To constrain the palette, the trim was painted blue and the door and furniture were painted to match the wood floor. From the palette of carpet available at Lowe's, I chose was a bluish grey somewhat in between the silver and the blue.



Collaborating with the costume designer added another layer to the color palette. I showed Mauren Perreira, the costume designer, my renderings so she could see what her costumes would be set against. She was working within the constraints of availability of specific sized vintage clothing. It was a purchased show as there was not enough time to build all of the costumes. The show is also modern enough that buying the costumes was the most feasible option. The clothing for the characters was

everyday street wear from the 1970's. The nerd remained in a bland palette at the request of the director. Black pants and white shirts were all that Rick wore.



The remaining clothing palette remained quite subdued with brown and rust tones with the occasional bright color or pattern. I would have liked to see her be a bit more risqué with some of her selections, but the costumes did match the characters the director and actors created.

Other collaborations were acceptable but did not really stand out as remarkable. The lighting designer, Mike Cino was delayed in returning to school for the fall semester of 2006 due to a summer stock commitment he made. He returned two weeks after the semester began, leaving his assistant to stand in for him before his arrival. His assistant was really only able to address functional issues until his arrival. Lighting issues, such as the ceiling fixtures, the ceiling itself, and the fireplace flue, that could have been solved earlier in the process were put on hold until he was available to deal with them. In the overall scheme of things, I did add scenic elements late in the process that must have been a challenge to the lighting designer. The background was neglected unintentionally as it became an afterthought while I focused on the architecture of the interior space. Ultimately, I had to integrate three dimensional elements because of the lack of foresight on planning the background. Branches were

attached to create the woodsy area and leaves were scattered to establish the fall season. These last minute additions were successful but late in the design process to expect it to get attention from the lighting designer. Having this information in advance would have given the lighting designer an advantage to better establish the exterior of the building during scenes where the environment played a role. Lighting a two versus a three dimensional object require different techniques to spread the light evenly and not produce shadows.

Working with the prop master and set dresser was not the best experience. Their interaction was filled with chaos. Disorganization resulted as each worked independently instead of collaboratively. This caused my time and attention to be taken away from the overall set design issues to deal with problems with the props.

Thankfully, Susan, the props instructor pitched in to bring all of the elements together for the opening of the show. The prepared food for the show was not addressed until the week of technical rehearsals. The list of food required was quite extensive so it should have been addressed earlier in the process. Five Cornish hens needed to be prepared somehow. As they were not going to be eaten, the propmaster could have produced them in many different ways. In the end, Susan was cooking Cornish hens the night before tech began. The side dishes were real food as well. A huge bowl of pasta, side salads, and a plate of spaghetti all had to be prepared as well. Each show, the stage managers and props run crew set up the food. All of the food had to last for the extent of the two week run. Deviled eggs were consumed each show so it was the only food that was replenished each night. The actor playing Rick tried to stuff as many in his mouth as he could. Thankfully the director limited his consumption so that not as

many eggs had to be prepared each night. One of the eggs had to be phony so that Axel could throw it into the fireplace.

Props in a realistic show such as this can be very important in establishing time frame and adding to the action of the play. The set props that stand out to me the most are the framed artwork of architectural landmarks. The buildings were easily printed out and framed in simple black metal frames. The challenge was which images to use. Due to the time period and Willum's need to be up to date on the latest architectural feats, the buildings needed to be recently designed and built. The tallest building at that time, World Trade Center, had just been built. Although this was one of the newer, well known buildings, I was reluctant to use this image to decorate the walls on the set of a comedy. I gave the director other options that were more acceptable but he was insistent on using the World Trade Center image.

The show ran over its allotted budget due to the various prop problems. The set dressing budget was not monitored as it could have been in order to prevent spending overages. The most difficult hand props were neglected creating a panic situation where anything is spent in order to get the show done. Multiple paper bags and saucers were used each show requiring lots of replenishing. The bags were torn and the saucers were broken each run requiring more money than usual for props.



In terms of set props, the furniture was a challenge of its own. The 1970's were identified with modern design, bell bottoms, polyester, graphics, wide collars, and coifed hair. Following the experimental sixties, this decade was more intentional therefore was important to capture that sentiment with the furnishings. A sofa in the style of the period was difficult to find. Eventually, I found a sofa style that worked but the upholstery fabric was not appropriate in relationship to the other colors on the set. The busy pattern in navy, tan, and cream worked somewhat with the overall color palette. Time and money constraints did not allow for recovering the sofa. Throw pillows would have been a good design detail to enhance the set colors, but time again was an issue.



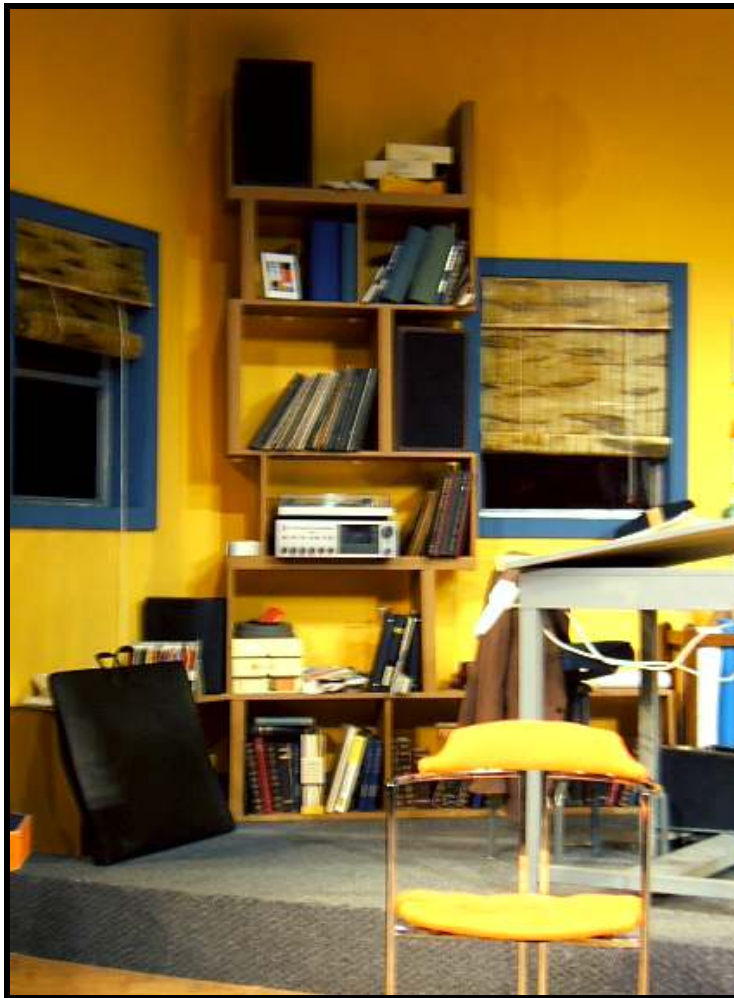
A rectangular coffee table parallel with the sofa became a multipurpose tool for the director. The food for Willum's surprise birthday party lived on that table while it was onstage. Rick's suitcase needed to be stowed under it for easy access to it later in the show. The challenge it presented was its sturdiness when the director blocked Rick to jump on it at the end of the first act to sing the "Star Bangled Banner". The original table did not have to meet these requirements when purchased so it needed some alteration. The lower shelf had to be removed in order to accommodate the suitcase chosen to be Rick's travel case. This would only weaken the structure that was already unable to accommodate the weight of the actor. The wooden legs of the coffee table ultimately were replaced with steel pipe. The lower shelf was replaced with $\frac{3}{4}$ " plywood as well. The table had been purchased for its style and color so all of the changes needed to take that into account. The steel and plywood had to be wood grained in the matching shade of brown after all of the rebuilding took place. Extra time was required to make the adjustments to the table for it to function as the director envisioned.



Adjustments were made late in set construction to the bookshelf in the upstage right corner of Willum's work area. In the original drawing set, specifications were included for a custom shelf to be built for that area. As the technical director and I discussed the materials originally chosen for the shelf, it became clear that changes needed to be made in order to have the shelf built under budget. This turned into an opportunity to redesign the bookshelf in a more unique manner. In my research, I had come across several inspiring shelf configurations.



I creatively reworked the shelf construction to take advantage of scrap wood with offset verticals. The shelf could not be too long due to the window locations so only a seating bench extended on the lowest level. This predicament resulted in a positive outcome.



The area established around the fireplace needed to have seating in order to allow the existence of this area to be believable. A fake lighted log fit with the kitschy style of the seventies.



I initially the goal was to have the fireplace look like the space-age retro “Igloo” I found in a 1970’s catalog. The ¼” scale model fireplace was made out of Sculpey. I was unable to come up with an easier solution to building the structure. I realized it would be a challenge to construct an oval shape that was lightweight with the resources available to the scene shop.



I researched further for another viable option. The director was not receptive to other options from earlier research.



Both images shown above are freestanding fireplace styles that were built in the seventies. I had to begin more specialized research at this point and come up with various options for the director to view. The chosen result was a good compromise having the style of the seventies yet simplified.



The extended research, design, and approval process for the fireplace left the project to be constructed at the end of the build. The technical director built the fireplace from an image and minimal dimensioning provided. Although it was not the best case scenario, the result looked great on set. The above left image is the one he referenced while building and, oddly enough, this research was found in a contemporary design book published in 2000.

Other furniture pieces were custom built. The bar needed to be shorter in height than a normal bar in order to keep from blocking the sightlines. I also was unable to find anything to purchase that was within the parameters of my research. The director was

in favor of a Plexiglas surface as he wanted the structure to block as little of the audience sightlines as possible. With the budget constraints, I took ideas from a more complicated bar design and created a simplified skeletal version with square tube steel and plywood.



These period research images show an interesting countertop shape that functions on both sides. Using that shape as its top, I designed a two tiered furniture piece that was creatively designed yet followed the functional constraints required. Finding stools to accent the bar became problematic because of its short height. I scoured storage and the studio furniture to find stools that were compatible with the bar height. The bar's stage left location in the thrust theatre space created an opportunity for the director. With blocking, the bar could be utilized from the back, near the house right seats, to serve drinks, from the front, toward center stage, to face the bartender, and from the front again to face the living room area toward center stage. The stools would need to rotate. The best solution to this was to find as many matching stools as possible that met the height requirement and add hardware to attach a swivel seat. Batting and fabric cover the plywood discs which became the rotating seats.



The legs of the bar angled inward at the bottom in a design gesture that caused balance issues after its fabrication. Its top heaviness was not only due to the angle of the legs. After the problem arose, it was discovered that the steel at the base was cut shorter than the drawings indicated. This problem was easy to solve as the bar ended up lag screwed to the floor in order to keep it from flipping.

With the construction of various custom furniture pieces errors were inevitable. The telephone table was the most problematic. The hexagonal layers used to create the table were assembled in the scene shop. The oversized scale was not initially observed. It was built to the drawing specifications but without reference to the stage size. When it was loaded in onstage, its exaggerated size was obvious.



It had not been constructed very well originally, therefore reducing its size saved time in finish work on the furniture piece. The angled cuts at each edge of the side panels were not meeting at a precise mitered corner. In the final version, the angles were cut properly finishing off this piece of furniture beautifully.



Evaluation of the Process

In the end, what I learned from the collaboration, process and construction of the set became important to apply to future projects. The learning opportunities of working in full scale do not compare to designing a theoretical class project. The technical director is on your back because there is a deadline for the drawings so that he can order the lumber, resolve unknown problems that are encountered during construction, and challenge of collaboration with designers who may not be completely dedicated to the process. These are a few examples of stressful situations that may occur along the way.

The overall ambiance of the set was very appropriate for an architect's abode. The actor playing the architect did not develop the character on a deep level that I was able to draw from in order to detail or dress the space more specifically. The personality created for Willum's character did not seem to quite match the space designed. The design could have been stronger in terms of small details. A constructive criticism pointed out after the show closed was that the unit set of the apartment did not feel "lived in". The character of Willum was not unique enough to help me develop the details of the space on his character. I should have stepped up and given him more of a personality through the set dressing and props in order to develop the story further. He ended up as a skittish type who was not as pulled together as the architecture of the space was.

Details that I did focus on did not always turn out as expected for one reason or another. For example, the parquet tile floor was a challenge from beginning to end. The technical director opted to install real parquet floor instead of a painted finish due to

time constraints. As the designer, I was pleased that this costly flooring was a viable option. It did present its own set of trials, for example, the color of the wood tiles in the boxes purchased didn't match. In unpacking the boxes prior to installation, the color discrepancy was discovered in time to mix up the colors in order to allow for a sporadic installation of the parquet tile. This material continued to create unforeseen difficult situations. A mistake made in dimensioning and incomplete notes in the parquet tile floor pattern layout ultimately cost the show build time and money. The angled layout of the front platforms allowed for a straight edge to be established from which to begin the floor installation. The layout of the parquet tile was parallel to the stage left angle of the floor platforms. As the designer, I needed to indicate that the full parquet tile installation began at the front edge of the stage left floor platform. The tile would have been easier to install, taken less installation time, and created a more aesthetic result. The actual installation layout created awkward, small pieces of tile. At this point in the build, the only way to continue was to finish the layout as it was begun. The technical director used the layout drawing to estimate the amount of tile to purchase. The original amount of parquet tile purchased was not enough to cover the entire platform area indicated. While backtracking to determine where the material estimate mistake was made, we found that the width of the lead line on the drawing layout created a 13" x 13" tile whereas the actual tile was 12" x 12". To avoid the wrong material purchase amount without estimating it myself should not have been the case. Providing that information to the technical director is beyond the scope of work of the scenic designer. As far as the installation issue with the tile, that could have easily been resolved with a note on the floor pattern floor plan as to where the full tile should have begun for installation.

The monetary overages on materials such as the parquet tile floor created limits further during the build. The backdrop was scheduled later in the build and the exact imagery had not been rendered. The result of these three factors was a compromise involving the show following *The Nerd*. The size of the backdrop for the following show *Medea* was already determined and was within workable parameters for *The Nerd* set so this scenic element ended up doing double duty. The sight lines from the far House Left and Right seats were problematic as a result of using backdrop flats sized for a different show.

Budget constraints did have some positive impact on some designing of the show. As there was not money to make furniture purchases, scrap material became the affordable way to produce the needed pieces. It was difficult to find an elliptical shaped bar for the down stage left area of the apartment. A last minute design was fabricated out of steel and plywood that captured the time period more than any found furniture could have. It also functioned to help the sightlines for the audience members seated behind the bar as the structure was more dissolved than originally planned. Using steel as a minimal yet structural material was successful in maximizing the view for those audience members.

A similar situation existed for another custom furniture piece. The upstage right wall of the apartment splayed out creating an obtuse angle in the corner. In order to define Willum's office area, a bookshelf was designed to be placed in this oddly shaped corner. In order to save money and integrate a shelf design I found in research later, during the build process, I altered the original design. I used scrap plywood to rework and improve the shelf design resulting in a better design in my opinion. It was more fitting to the 70's design style and had a creative look more fitting for an architect's apartment.

Props procurement and building created challenges for the show. The real food being used needed more attention than it was given. There are many aspects of food on stage that needs to be considered and these challenges were neglected. Real food used onstage is a very difficult feat in my opinion after the experience on this show. It was helpful to have gone through this process so that I could learn from the situation in order to apply the knowledge to *When you Comin' Back Red Ryder?* This show required onstage cooking so that added an extra layer of complication to the food prop situation of *The Nerd*.

The height is always an issue in the modified thrust space of Hodges Theatre. The wing walls suggest a false proscenium yet there is no proper arch that continues therefore masking must be used if the height needs to be lowered. In the design of Willum's apartment, I wanted to create an architectural space with intimacy. I used a ceiling above the back patio door area upstage and an overhang above the main living space downstage in order to do this. I did not address the blank space above this ceiling line established by structure. This created an open space that needed to be blacked out in order to distinguish between stage and backstage areas. I left this major design element until the set was already in construction which created problems in developing the result in an efficient manner. In hindsight, I should have inventoried the number of border curtains available to the theatre. In Hodges Theatre, borders and legs are the only way to black out the off stage areas. These areas should have been a priority for me during the design process in order to frame out the design. If I wanted the set to float in space, this wouldn't have been an issue but the overall design used the blacks to anchor it to the space. Using the vomitoriums as part of the stage action was another anchoring device. The steps downstage directed the characters off or

onstage through the vomms as the main apartment entrance as well as the bedroom entrance. Using the theatre space entrances as part of the set cements the spaces together where the interaction between the two becomes very important to the overall design. A hierarchy of spaces can exist, usually the building then the set. Here I was trying to unify the two so the architecture of the building faded into the background.

With my next design in this space, I was going for another feel completely. This drama is set in a diner in the southwest that time has forgotten. A lot of physical action is required to occur on set and I wanted the audience to be a part of that conflict. This led the scenic design of the diner to be fleshed out in a completely different way. The design for *When you Comin' Back Red Ryder?* floated within the space of Hodges Theatre in comparison to the weight of *The Nerd* set. As a designer, it seemed odd to me that such intimacy was created although the *Red Ryder* set was not as linked to the theatre space. Pushing the acting area further downstage for the *Red Ryder* set allowed for the audience to be in closer proximity to the characters and ultimately feel more connected to the space. *The Nerd*, as a comedy has a different set of physical and functional requirements. Ultimately it was a proscenium style set that was best viewed from the center house seats. I do feel more intimacy was achieved with the *Red Ryder* set and it was as visually interesting to watch from all sides of the house. I feel these aspects made it a more successful design in comparison of the two. But, in both, I feel I rose to the challenge of creating a theatrical space and did convey the action of the story which is an important part of scenic design.

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